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Why Are You Standing Here?

Acts 1:1-11

Thomas Michael Smith
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Today we celebrate a special Sunday in the church year - the day when millions of Christians around the world remember the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. That Jesus rose from the dead and is enthroned at the right hand of the Father has always been an important part of Christian faith. We confess our belief in the ascension when we say the Apostles' Creed. We hear the Scriptures report how Jesus departed from earth through the clouds.

Yet, as vital as the ascension is to our faith, it's never caught on outside the church the way Christmas has, or Easter. There are no TV specials on the true meaning of ascension. If you go to the Westfield Mall after church, you won't see any huge signs for Ascension season specials. And that's because Ascension is an inside story.

When we look at the accounts of the Ascension, we find that only the followers of Jesus watched him ascend. And in the forty-day period after Easter, the risen Christ appeared to many people many times, but only to people who acknowledged him Lord, and never to the Scribes and or the Pharisees. And not in these cases to the random crowds who would come out to see Jesus the miracle worker. So when Jesus tells some people to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of God, he was speaking to a select group, his followers. These insiders were going to receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and be the first witnesses for Jesus Christ to the world.

Are we like this small band of disciples? I think so. We count ourselves as part of Jesus' company of followers, and so this story intersects the place where we live. I see a message to us in the words of the angels. In verse 11 they say: "Why are you standing here looking into the sky?" Well, I'll tell you why. We're standing here looking into the sky because the guy we have been following rose from the dead and has spent the last forty days talking with us.

- **We followed him**
- **We experienced the anguish of his passion and death**
- **We didn't at first believe but now we do believe that he rose from the dead**
- **We know that everything he said was true**
- **We saw him leave right before our eyes into a cloud**
- **And we're uncertain what to do next**

This speaks to me. I have been working with new material over the past two years, substance in the Bible concerning the Holy Spirit I had not seen nor understood in the first 21 years of my life as a pastor. Prior to the last several years, I had a clearer sense of what to do. Before being convicted by God that there was more to ministry than I had imagined, I was pretty certain

of my way. But these days I feel just like these disciples, just standing there looking into the sky, not entirely sure what to do next.

I don't feel badly about my ministry before the last two years. The current leaders of one of the early churches I served were part of the Bethel course I taught there twenty years ago. They are bringing visionary leadership to that church in Cincinnati. My time in Wheaton, Illinois produced some real progress in missions, notably an outreach to the local country jail, and it was there I first began teaching Stephen Ministry. My time in Michigan was marked by more Stephen Ministry, spiritual renewal, and a great deal of lay leadership development. And I am delighted to be the pastor of this church, a place where much solid ministry has been continued, and new ministries have begun. So I look back on my pastorates and feel good about them.

God doesn't forbid us from remembering with thanksgiving and joy. But the angels warn against standing still, as though the work of God is over, the glory past, with not much ahead. The Ascension marks the conclusion of a chapter, not the end of God's story. And he promises here that there will be a happy ending - *his* ending for those who love him.

The angels chided the disciples for lingering on the hillside after Jesus vanished. Beyond clinging to the past at the expense of the future, there is a real and present danger in standing and gazing at the sky. You see, if we are fixated on our own patch of ground on Mt. Olivet, on our own perspective of the ascending Christ, it's impossible for us to see the way Jesus works in others. The church has a long history of pain and damage caused by sincere Christians who never really see each other. That's the more profound problem - how to get to a distortion-free perspective, how to see the many and varied ways in which the Holy Spirit is working in the midst of CPC. None of us can afford elitism. What we can afford is prayer for one another, and ears opening to listening to how our mighty God is acting in our congregation.

There is, finally, one more problem with remaining on Mt. Olivet, or at whatever place we think we last encountered Christ. That problem is disobedience. Those first disciples were commanded to *go* somewhere = into Jerusalem. They were told to *do* something = to wait for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit … so that they could *be* someone else = effective witnesses to all the world.

They went <u>and</u> they waited <u>and</u> they received the great promise of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate again next Sunday. The Spirit brought spiritual gifts, and deep insight into the work of Jesus, enabling the early church to turn the world upside down and begin the movement of which we are a continuing part. And as they began the new chapter in God's plan, they labored to work with one another, to care for one another, as they sensed the movement of God in their midst. Like us, those early church people wanted to preserve the best of their past and present, while at the same time, being utterly sensitive to the movements of the Spirit in leading them to new places.

Some years ago, I was driving on an expressway in Chicago, and it seemed that the closer I came to the 'Loop,' the worse everyone was driving. Cars drifted from one lane to another, braked for no apparent reason, nearly collided with one another, and didn't even seem to notice. It was frightening. I wondered if everyone was drunk. Once I got past the Loop things seemed to get back to normal.

Later that day, I turned on the radio to listen to the news and learned that a young daredevil had been arrested for trying to climb the Sears Tower using only rock-climbing equipment. The other drivers on I-94 had been trying to watch his progress instead of looking where they were going. It's amazing that no one was killed or injured in a collision.

Some of us practice our faith like those drivers. We become distracted by the new and forget the proven ways to get from A to B. Yet, others of us might be challenged by the angels in this first chapter of Acts, who want to know why we're standing here looking into the sky? Jesus has ascended into heaven, and we have been told *where* to go, *what* to do and, eventually, *who* to become, a people empowered by the Spirit, called to witness and to give glory to Jesus Christ our Lord and God. For many, that's a new and power-laden addition to the ways we have done ministry in the past.

Some become too focused on Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, and drive as if they are not concerned with the body, our family here at CPC. Others are too focused on the past, the way we have done things, and miss the new wine in new wineskins Jesus is bringing to us all.

The words of the angels are not only a gentle rebuke and a set of instructions for disciples, they are also a promise to all who follow Jesus. He will come again, the angels promise, in a way as mysterious and inexplicable as that in which he departed. Jesus Christ, our great high priest who appears in the presence of God for us, will gather all the people of God to himself. The work to which we have been commissioned will be completed. By his mercy and goodness, we shall someday see his face, and praise him joyfully for ever and ever.

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